



Meet Donald Soctomah

If you ask Donald Soctomah what comes to mind when he hears the words “Passamaquoddy history” he might say “a camera, a digital voice recorder, a laptop computer, a cell phone, a canoe and a Subaru Outback.” That’s because almost every day, Donald uses these tools to learn, gather and document the history of his people, the Passamaquoddy.

Behind the wheel of his red Subaru Outback, Donald drives between Indian Township, the Passamaquoddy Reservation near Princeton, Maine, and Sipayik, the Reservation at Pleasant Point. In both communities, he takes pictures of everyday life, like people fishing in Big Lake, or children hard at work in language class. He is also interested in the deeper parts of Passamaquoddy life, like religion, people’s interactions with nature, ancestral songs and the relationships between the Passamaquoddy and other tribes.

Another passion of Donald’s is oral history. Something he especially likes doing is interviewing Passamaquoddy elders—he records their memories about what life was like long ago or even their favorite stories, which have been passed down from their great-great-grandparents or even earlier. Many of the elders tell their stories in Passamaquoddy even though they also speak English. Donald loves hearing Passamaquoddy—he spoke only Passamaquoddy as a young boy.

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Currently the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Passamaquoddy tribe, Donald also works with state and federal agencies to preserve and protect historic properties and other resources on Passamaquoddy tribal land. In 1999, Donald helped to identify and protect an archaeological site important to the Passamaquoddy people, later named “Ntolonapemk” in Passamaquoddy, or “My Ancestor’s Place” in English. This archaeological site was discovered during an emergency federal cleanup of a toxic dumping site bordered by Meddybemps Lake. Once artifacts were found, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency worked closely with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission and the Passamaquoddy Tribe to preserve the archaeological site. Donald worked hard to ensure the important archaeological collections would belong to the Passamaquoddy Tribe instead of the federal government. Currently, the Abbe Museum holds these important artifacts in trust for the Passamaquoddy until the Tribe’s museum is federally certified and licensed.

Whether it’s a 6,000-year-old spear point or a digital picture of his aunt picking sweetgrass just the other day, Donald is committed to preserving and protecting Passamaquoddy history—yesterday’s and today’s.

He is the author of Passamaquoddy at the Turn of the Century, 1890-1920: Tribal Life and Times in Maine and New Brunswick and Hard Times at Passamaquoddy, 1921-1950: Tribal Life in Maine and New Brunswick.